The Role of Gullah/Geechee People in the Plantation Economy

When enslaved Africans arrived in the Low Country, they undoubtedly recognized the similarities between their new home and the native land they had been forced to leave. They surely realized that the Low Country area was suitable for growing rice, and some were able to acquire enough seed to grow rice for their families. These enslaved Africans eventually shared their knowledge of rice cultivation with plantation owners and talked of the many growing methods in their native West Africa.

Peter Wood (1974) and Daniel Littlefield (1991) first emphasized the diffusion of rice cultivation skills from West Africa to South Carolina. Judith Carney (2001:4), referring to the research of Wood and Littlefield, noted that rather than studying the impact of one culture upon another, they pointed out the way in which

> …Africans from diverse ethnicities, thrown together in slavery, created a new way of life in coastal Carolina, where a crop known only to some of them became the plantation staple. The association of agricultural skills with certain African ethnicities…called for a research perspective emphasizing…culture in relationship to technology and the environment.

South Carolina rice culture, which began during the late 17th Century on the mainland, used the upland or dry land method of cultivation, which was dependent upon rainfall for irrigation. By the early 18th Century, most planters were growing rice in freshwater inland swamps, where a portion of the swamp was dammed to provide a reliable water supply for irrigation. This method provided higher yields and profits, as the crop was not dependent on rainfall. In the 17th and early 18th centuries, before the inland swamp and tidal methods of rice cultivation became prevalent, the average yield was 1,000 pounds clean rice per acre. By the 1770s the figure had risen to 1,500 pounds per acre (Edgar 1998).

In the 1730's a few planters began to experiment with the tidal method of rice cultivation in which the power of the tidewater rivers was harnessed to irrigate the crop. Because of the tremendous expense involved in creating the fields for tidal cultivation, few planters utilized this method until after the American Revolution (Edgar 1998; Chaplin 1992).

Building fields for tidal rice cultivation required extraordinary physical labor. Enslaved Africans cleared mammoth virgin cypress-gum forests with trees as large as five feet in diameter. Using only hand tools, oxen, and sweat to do a back-breaking job that would be difficult even with today's mechanical implements, enslaved Africans built earthen dikes, ten to twelve feet in height. Many lost their lives to alligators, venomous snakes, and disease. The region around what is now Georgetown County, South Carolina, contained the largest number of rice plantations and yielded the largest exports of processed rice.

Captain Basil Hall, 19th Century world traveler and author of Travels in North America (1829), described his observation of rice cultivation as follows,

> [Rice] is the most unhealthy work in which the slaves were employed, and they sank under it in great numbers. The causes of this dreadful mortality are the constant moisture and heat of the atmosphere, together with the alternate floodings and dryings of the fields, on which the negroes [sic] are perpetually at work, often ankle deep in mud, with their bare heads exposed to the fierce rays of the sun.

The swampy mosquito-filled rice fields favored diseases such as malaria and yellow fever, diseases which were deadly to Europeans, American Indians, and some enslaved Africans. Many Africans, from the Rice Coast of West Africa, however, possessed a degree of immunity to these diseases. Rice planters were often absentee owners who spent the sickly months from early May to late October in the pinelands and the winter social season in their elegant city homes. As a consequence, rice production was frequently managed by the slaves themselves under the direction of a white overseer and a black driver (Pollitzer 1999).

Rice Shaking *by Alice Ravenel Huger Smith*

Enslaved Africans, however, did a great deal more than clear swamps, dig ditches, prepare rice fields for cultivation, and labor through the year-long process of rice production. After harvesting the rice, enslaved Africans beat the grain from the stalks with flailing sticks. They used flat round fanner baskets to separate the rice from the stalks, and husked the rice with a mortar and pestle. The aforementioned tools and techniques came directly from West Africa (Edgar, 1998; Littlefield 1981, 1995; Carney and Porcher 1993). Carney refers to the transfer of rice and rice growing techniques to the Americas as the "diffusion of an indigenous knowledge system" (2001:6).

According to Carney, early records and recent archaeology show that over 100 years before the colonization of South Carolina, an irrigated rice system, which harnessed the tides to flood the fields, was in place along the estuaries of the Gambia River in West Africa. Africans also used the upland rice method, where rain water was collected in holding ponds to irrigate the fields. These knowledge systems, well established on the floodplains of West Africa, were brought across the Atlantic Middle Passage by slaves who shared their agricultural knowledge with their European owners (Carney 2001).

The floodgates used in tidewater rice production were referred to as rice trunks in South Carolina. David Doar, descendant of a rice planter, was curious about the use of that term and solved the mystery before writing a book on rice culture, which was published under the sponsorship of the Charleston Museum. In this volume, Doar stated (1936:12):

> For years the origin of this name [rice trunk] bothered me. I asked every old planter I knew, but no one could enlighten me. One day a fried of mine who planted on one of the lowest places…said to me with a smiling face: 'I have solved that little trunk question. In putting down another one, I unearthed the granddaddy of plug trunks made long before I was born.' It was simply a hollow cypress log with a large hole from top to bottom. When it was to be stopped up, a large plug was put in tightly and it acted on the same principle as a wooden spigot to a beer keg.

Although the plug trunk was later replaced by a mechanical hanging gate that regulated the flow of water into the rice fields, the terminology remained the same throughout the colonial period. The term rice trunk was, thus, a carry over from the earliest method of water control in the Low Country – a method used in West Africa during that time period and still in used today for mangrove rice production in Africa (Carney 2001).

Carolina Gold, Turnbridge Plantation, Jasper County, SC (2001)

Thus, the emergence of rice as the chief export crop along the southeast coast was largely due to this transfer of knowledge from West Africa – agronomic knowledge of cultivation methods, systems of water control, and milling techniques. There is documentary evidence to show that in the period between 1695 and 1715, as rice took hold in the colony, the population of African slaves grew equal to and then surpassed the European population. Enslaved Africans from the rice growing regions demonstrated their engineering expertise in tidal rice production, which is a function of coastal geomorphology, hydrology, and rainfall (Carney 1993, 2001). The black majority dominated the Low Country until well into the 20th Century. The white population of Georgia began to exceed the black population during the 1930s; while in South Carolina this change did not come about until the 1950s. Rice cultivation techniques and free-range cattle farming are but two examples of the African influence on coastal plantation life (Wood 1974). Historically, enslaved African ancestors of Gullah/Geechee people were unique among Africans for their major roles in the development of the rice plantation and the agricultural economy of the region.

Unprocessed rice resting on a fanner basket

The Task System: How It Fostered Gullah/Geechee Culture

The task system was predominant along the South Carolina, Georgia and north Florida coasts, and differed significantly from the dawn-to-dark gang system practiced in the other colonies. Despite differences in work pattern, enslaved Africans from both the gang and task systems created work rhythms by singing as they labored in the fields. Many of these work songs had secret meanings that referred to freedom, escape, flight to Africa, and sometimes even death.

Rather than working sun-up to sunset, task system slaves were assigned a specific amount of work that was to be completed in one day. This measure of work was called a task, and for an able bodied field hand this task could vary from ¼ acre to ½ acre to be worked depending on the job required. Children and older people were assigned ½ task or ¼ task according to their abilities. Once the day's task was completed, workers had time for themselves or to help family members who worked more slowly. In the evenings or on Sundays enslaved Africans often went to work for themselves, cultivating small gardens adjoining their homes on nearby vacant land. They were able to raise poultry and livestock, fish, gather oysters and crabs, produce handicrafts, and spend time with others in their community. Slaves were sometimes rented to another plantation or public project. In some cases the funds generated when to the master, but slaves were generally allowed to keep a part or all of the money they earned.

Under the task system, enslaved Africans could accumulate money and property. Some were even able to buy freedom for themselves or family members (Morgan 1983). Enslaved men and boys hunted and fished extensively to supplement table rations drawn from their owners and sold excess meat, fish, and skins or traded them for clothing and other goods. Some enslaved Africans established elaborate trading systems for their crops and crafts. Since most plantations had river access, many of the goods were bartered and sold along the rivers, which were the major transportation routes of the day. Hunting and fishing to supplement rations has been well-documented by modern archaeological research (cf. Fairbanks 1968; Ehrenhard and Bullard, 1981).

Not only did the task system inspire individual initiative, it also encouraged family, religious, and community activities by which the slaves were able to carry on their African-derived customs and practices without fear of interference. There were, of course, some slave owners who foiled these practices by ensuring that assigned tasks were impossible to complete, but most planters saw the perquisites of the task system as morale boosters for their labor force.

The American Revolution brought about even more slave autonomy in the Low Country and Sea Islands. The general disruption of war and the military obligations of white men increased the existing tendency toward owner absenteeism and served to increase the isolation between enslaved Africans and the white population. Immediately post war there was a major surge in the importation of new African slaves to compensate for wartime losses and to secure slave laborers before the federal government curtailed the practice. The late 18th Century was, therefore, a time of owner absenteeism, slave isolation, the task system, and an internal slave economy. During this period, Gullah/Geechee language and culture took firm root and became the embodiment of the coastal region's cultural distinctiveness (Kolchin 1994).

The fact that enslaved Africans had a measure of independence, free time, and responsibility on the rice plantations is not only testimony to their innate intelligence, but is also a source of connection and loyalty to the land itself – a loyalty that still exists today in Gullah/Geechee communities. This love of and connection to the land is yet another reason why loss of family lands to developers has dealt such a devastating blow to the social structure and cultural values of these communities.

Last standing slave cabin, Oryzantia Plantation, Hobcaw Barony, Georgetown County, South Carolina

Although the task system may have made life a little easier for slaves on coastal plantations, in no way did it compensate for the yoke of slavery under which they were forced to live and work. Like the gang slaves, those under the task system sang work songs that often had secret meanings referring to freedom, escape, or flight to Africa. In some cases the songs called for freedom through death (Parrish 1992).

Although some privileges were granted to laborers under the task system, the fact remains that they were still slaves and were under the direct control of their masters. These human beings were chattel, personal property of their masters, and were subject to arbitrary beatings and other harsh punishments. Enslaved Africans were continuously under the threat of being taken to the auction house and sold to satisfy their master's debts or heirs. The worst threat of all was that their families would be split up and sold. Enslaved Africans never accepted their condition, and engaged in work stoppages and work slow downs as a means of protest.

While working under the task system provided limited independence and small amounts of personal time to field workers, the task system did not apply to household slaves. Often domestic slaves are imagined as having easier lives than those who worked in the fields – once again conjuring Hollywood images of smiling black mammies in the big house, cooking and tending to the children. According to Catherine Clinton in The Plantation Mistress, this antebellum Mammy never existed (1982: 201-02).

> This familiar denizen of the Big House [Mammy] is not merely a stereotype, but in fact a figment of the combined romantic imaginations of the contemporary southern ideologue and the modern southern historians. …Not until after Emancipation did black women run white households or occupy any significant number of the special positions ascribed to them in folklore and fiction.

Clinton believes that Mammy was created by antebellum white southerners to depict a familial relationship between black women and white men in response to antislavery

attacks from the North. After the war Mammy image may have been embellished for the sake of nostalgia (1982).

While their work may have been physically easier than field work and their living conditions and clothing slightly better, the work assigned to domestic slaves was never-ending. They were generally on 24-hour call – some were even required to sleep on a pallet near their mistress' bed. Domestic servants were allowed little time for their own meals and practically no time with their own families. When they were permitted to eat, they ate the leftovers or scraps from the family meal. Field hands, however, had more leisure time and freedom of movement with Sundays and later afternoons off to tend their own fields (Harper 1985).

Cooks and their helpers spent most of their time in the kitchen building, where the cooking fire was kept blazing all day and banked at night. The kitchen was an inferno-like sweatshop, particularly during the hot summer months. The cook's work was dangerous, as she was constantly lifting heavy pots, sometimes causing her long skirts and sleeves to come very close to the fire. Although they may have cooked meals for the planter, they were not allowed to even taste what they had prepared until after the master and his family finished their meal. Covered walkways led between the kitchen building and the dining room of the main house. These walkways came to be called whistle walks, as slave women were forced to whistle while carrying food so that they could not eat along the way. Frequently, they were required to eat while squatting before the kitchen fireplace as they cooked for the next meal.

House slaves were more often sexually abused and exploited than field hands. Enslaved women may have survived the Middle Passage only to see themselves and their daughters confronted with yet another terror. Mulatto children fathered by the master were rarely acknowledged. In her *Diary from Dixie*, Mary Boykin Chesnut (1997), mistress of Mulberry Plantation in South Carolina wrote,

> God forgive us, but ours is a monstrous system, a wrong and iniquity…[A slaveholder's] wife and daughters in the might of their purity and innocence are supposed never to dream of what is plain before their eyes as sunlight, and they play their parts of unsuspecting angels to the letter.

Some masters flaunted their slave relationships, while others kept their illicit liaisons secret. Some of these men sold their mulatto offspring to protect their wives, while others insisted that these children become house slaves. In either case, such children were often separated from their black families. Since it was almost impossible for wives involved in these triangular situations to get out of their marriages, they sometimes took out their frustration in unfair, cruel behavior toward their household slaves.

The Impact of Gullah/Geechee Ancestors on the Coastal Landscape

The labors of Gullah/Geechee ancestors left an indelible mark on the Low Country environment. The Low Country is a place where natural, historic, and cultural resources are inexorably intertwined to form this distinctive setting. Early settlers who came to the Carolina Colony found tall virgin forests of longleaf pine. These forests were the source of the first export products, naval stores, timber, and deerskins. For the deerskin trade, European settlers depended upon indigenous peoples beyond the frontier to supply the trading houses of Charleston, Savannah, and elsewhere. As fields were cleared for agriculture, lumber from felled trees could be exported. Thick cypress-gum forests grew along the river banks.

Then came the process that would change the terrain forever. Rice became king, but its status was attained through the forced labor of enslaved Africans. They cleared the cypress-gum forests, where trees were often so thick that it was often impossible to see the sky. On this land they built an extensive dike system with rice trunks or sluice gates to control the periodic flooding of rice fields. Even today it is nearly impossible to look out over a coastal waterway and not see lingering images of rice fields – imprints of unique patterns of forced human labor. The patchwork outlines of these former rice fields remain as silent tributes to the enslaved Africans who built them.

The blood, sweat, and back-breaking physical labor of these Africans, direct ancestors of the Gullah/Geechee people, made a lasting mark on the tidal river ecosystems of the Low Country. These slave-built structures have remained highly visible and valuable contributory elements of the coastal environment for nearly 200 years. In addition to the rice fields, slaves built canals for boats to carry rice through the salt marshes to the rivers. The rice culture caused the most extensive environmental changes along the eastern seaboard of that era.

University of South Carolina archaeologist Leland Ferguson described a rice plantation in terms that may help the reader understand the magnitude of physical labor demanded of the enslaved Africans (1992).

> These fields are surrounded by more than a mile of earthen dikes or ‘banks’ as they were called. Built by slaves, these banks … were taller than a person and up to 15 feet wide. By [1800], rice banks on the 12½ mile stretch of the East Branch of the Cooper River measured more than 55 miles long and contained more than 6.4 million feet of earth … This means that … working in the water and muck with no more than shovels, hoes, and baskets … by 1850 Carolina slaves .. on [tidal] plantations like Middleburg throughout the rice growing district had built a system of banks and canals…nearly three times the volume of Cheops, the world’s largest pyramid.

Many abandoned rice fields are now covered over with wild grasses that provide feasts for many thousands of birds and provide havens near the shoreline for river alligators. Without the intrusion of rice fields into the cultural landscape of South Carolina and Georgia, there might not be as many lush marshes to serve as breeding grounds for shrimp and other marine organisms. The wetlands and estuaries along the tidewater river systems that serve as wildlife refuges would be considerably smaller. There would be far fewer migratory and aquatic/marine birds.

Plantation owners of today have become an important force in land conservation efforts and have provided a model for rural land use and conservation nationwide. Tens of thousands of acres of plantation lands have been placed in conservation easements during

the past 25 years, thus preventing development and logging. These protected private lands have become the heart of larger conservation efforts such as the ACE Basin (Ashepoo, Combahee, and Edisto River Basin); where over 40,000 acres are currently under protection. The Historic Ricefields Association strongly promoted establishment of the Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge in the forested floodplains of the Pee Dee and Waccamaw Rivers (Tibbetts, 1999).

Researchers with the Sea Grant Consortium are currently studying the areas along the Cooper River where breached impoundments are allowing the land to grow thick with vegetation. Unless these dikes are replaced or repaired, the fields could become cypress-gum forests once again. Some landowners want to rebuild the dikes and manage for waterfowl. Boaters and fisherman want the breached dikes to remain as they are because unrepaired impoundments (rice fields) provide excellent fishing sites. (Tibbetts, 1999)

At present, environmental scientists are studying the ecology and plant progression of abandoned rice fields within the context of historical land use patterns. They are collecting data and trying to understand the ecological interaction between the river and various stages of plant growth within the fields. As their database grows, scientists hope to be able to predict the impacts of various management options and know more about the ecological consequences of each.

The rice culture and other agricultural endeavors, along with related traditions that have evolved over the centuries, combine to make the Gullah/Geechee people and their surroundings significant in both the regional and national experience. Continued use of this region by Gullah/Geechee people, whose culture and traditions helped to shape the landscape and were in turn shaped by the coastal environment; serves to further enhance the significance of the land and the people.

Slave cabins at McCleod Plantation, Historic Charleston Foundation.

From Freedom to Gated Resorts: Gullah/Geechee Communities Between the Civil War and World War II

At the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, the slave population of America was estimated to be about 4,000,000. When President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, it applied only to "rebellious states" and stated "that all persons held as slaves are, and henceforward shall be free." Slavery in the United States was finally outlawed on January 31, 1865, by the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, which states: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

On January 12, 1865, Major-General William Tecumseh Sherman, who was in the midst of his infamous "march to the sea," met with Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and 20 black clergy and community leaders from Savannah, Georgia, to discuss the future of former slaves after their emancipation. In his Memoirs, Sherman states that he asked the black leaders if they preferred to live among the white people or in separate communities. Garrison Frasier, spokesman for the group, replied, "I would prefer to live by ourselves, for there is a prejudice against us in the South that will take years to get over." Nineteen of the twenty black men agreed. Sherman and Stanton considered this information, and four days later on January 16, 1865, Sherman issued Special Field Orders Number 15, in which he set aside (Sherman 1875):

> 1. The islands from Charleston south, the abandoned rice-fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea, and the country bordering the St. John's River, Florida, are reserved and set apart for the settlement of the Negroes [sic] now made free by the acts of war and the proclamation of the President of the United States.
>
> 2. At Beaufort, Hilton Head, Savannah, Fernandina, St. Augustine, and Jacksonville, the blacks may remain in their chosen or accustomed vocations; but on the islands, and in the settlements hereafter to be established, no white person whatever, unless military officers and soldiers detailed for duty, will be permitted to reside; and the sole and exclusive management of affairs will be left to the freed people themselves, subject only to the United States military authority, and the acts of Congress. By the laws of war, and orders of the President of the United States, the negro [sic] is free, and must be dealt with as such….
>
> 3. Whenever three respectable negroes [sic], heads of families, shall desire to settle on land, and shall have selected for that purpose an island or a locality clearly defined within the limits above designated, the Inspector of Settlements and Plantations will himself, or by such subordinate officer as he may appoint, give them a license to settle such island or district, and afford them such assistance as he can to enable them to establish a peaceable agricultural settlement. The three parties named will subdivide the land, under the supervision of the inspector, among themselves, and such others as may choose to settle near them, so that each family shall have a plot of not more than forty acres of tillable ground, and, when it borders on some water channel, with not more than eight hundred feet water-front, in the possession of which land the military authorities will afford them protection until such time as they can protect themselves or until Congress shall regulate their title….

Thus, each family was to receive 40 acres of land and an army mule to work the land. Sherman assigned General Rufus Saxton to implement the Order. According to Sherman, he wanted to "...give the freedmen protection, land and schools as far and as fast as he can." (1990). The Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands was formed to assist with land acquisition and to provide schools for the newly freed people throughout the South. Eventually over 40,000 blacks were settled on 40-acre tracts. However, many were driven from their newly acquired land during the summer and fall of 1865, when President Andrew Johnson reversed Sherman's order, issued special pardons to Confederate rebels, and returned much of the property to its former owners. Thus the phrase "40 acres and a mule" has become synonymous with an empty promise among African-Americans.

Strategies to disenfranchise and further undo the empowerment gained by African-Americans drove both the South's economic and social policies immediately following the Civil War. The implications of these policies for African Americans were the significant push factor that drove the out-migration of Gullah/Geechee people. In 1900, migration patterns of most African Americans were limited geographically. Almost 90 % of all African Americans lived in the South and many continued to stay until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's created another large out-migration. (See Demographic History section)

Scholarly opinion is mixed as to when racial segregation became standard practice. According to George Tindall, "At the end of the Reconstruction period the pattern of racial segregation had not been rigidly defined. [During the next 20 years] segregation became an established and unquestioned fact in all the institutions and relationships between the two races" (1966:291). Joel Williamson, on the other hand, believes that "well before the end of Reconstruction, separation had crystallized into a comprehensive pattern which, in essence, remained unaltered until the middle of the twentieth century" (1965:275).

Funding is being sought to create a park to commemorate the Mitchellville Site, Beach City Rd., Hilton Head Island, SC

Some Gullah/Geechee people acquired land via the Special Field Order, some joined in groups to purchase lands, others claimed land that had been abandoned, but land ownership became and continues to be a very high priority. Small settlements, often beginning as intergenerational family compounds, sprang up – sometimes on lands where new landowners had previously been enslaved. These small communities, bound together by family ties, helped one another through the time of extreme poverty in the immediate aftermath of the war. Subsistence farming and fishing were the greatest sources of table food and income. Open lands were also available for hunting and provided yet another means to supplement the table. Utilizing the resources available to them, Gullah/Geechee people developed an economic base that ensured community solidarity and self-sufficiency. Because of this independence, Gullah/Geechee people were not subjected to the share cropping system to the same extent as were freedmen farther inland. Elders of these socially well integrated Gullah/Geechee communities passed on distinct language, stories, customs, and social practices to each new generation. In this respect, women were especially important in the transmission of distinctive Gullah/Geechee family rituals and esoteric lore.

Able-bodied family members provided table food and other resources to the elders, the disabled, and those unable to fend for themselves. This system of providing food and resources continued to function during the Great Depression, as close family ties and sharing of sustenance kept communities together. Development and crystallization of distinct free-holder Gullah/Geechee communities and family compounds continued through the late 19th and early 20th Centuries.

Toward the end of the 19th Century, the timber industry, seafood processing, subsistence farming, and commercial fishing contributed to the "Golden Age" of Gullah/Geechee economic self-sufficiency, relative freedom from outsider intrusion, and blossoming of performing and graphic arts.

During the 1940s and '50s, Hazel's Café was a thriving restaurant in the Southend Community on St. Simon's Island. Today the building is used for private parties.

The late 19th Century also saw the construction of the United States Naval Station, Port Royal, which lies along Port Royal Sound. The base was re-named as a Marine Corps Recruit Depot in 1915 and continues to play a significant role in the local economy. The early 20th Century brought about the "discovery" of Gullah/Geechee language and culture by artists and scholars. During the same timeframe, there was a parallel "discovery" by those desiring Gullah/Geechee natural resources and lands. Northern commercial fishermen with capital and large motorized vessels slowly began to replace small independent black fishermen and shrimpers from Charleston to Florida. Some of these men went to work on the larger vessels; others shifted to the pulpwood industry. Gilded age magnates, automobile touring, and bridges brought the first major wave of modern outside land pressure, stress, and influence to coastal communities of the Gullah and Geechee people.

World War II brought significant changes to the area. In addition to the Marine base at Parris Island, the government acquired lands in the Harris Neck Community in McIntosh County, Georgia, to build coastal defense air strips. The post-war boom and the invention of air conditioning further stimulated an influx of middle class Americans in significant numbers as year-round residents of the coast. Thus, Hilton Head Island, ironically the location of administrative headquarters for the Freedman's Bureau in the early days of Reconstruction, became, one hundred years later, the type-case reference point for massive social displacement and economic "swamping" of Gullah/Geechee people and their culture. "We don't want another Hilton Head" is commonly used nowadays as a precautionary warning against unbridled development of undisturbed locales yet to be "discovered" by outsiders.

While Gullah/Geechee people have made gains in civil rights, the intrusions of development and the subsequent population explosion along the coast have brought a growing awareness of the loss of their way of life, their language, and their culture.

Gullah/Geechee people do not seek to live in the past or to arrest the flow of history. Rather, they are a living, changing people – a culture of survivors who seek to adapt and thrive in the 21st century in new ways, true enough, but without exploitation, without gentrification or commodification, and without the intrusion of a "New Plantation" economy (Pinsky 1983, 1992).

These St Simons Island row houses (left) were built in the 1940s to house employees of Sea Island resorts. The houses now stand empty, but could possibly be adapted for re-use as bed and breakfast cottages.

This 1950s era barbershop abovet) stands abandoned in the Harrington community, St. Simons Island, GA.

This 100 year-old structure (above) was once Boney Brown's Store and family residence on Squire Pope Road, Hilton Head Island, SC. Although the Brown-Grant family had hoped to save the building, it was recently demolished.

Charlie Simmons once owned the gasoline powered boat that made daily runs from Broad Creek on Hilton Head Island to Daufuskie, Beaufort, and Savannah. This building once served those waiting to catch the boat. It was later made into a "juke joint" and later a fish camp. A restaurant is now planned.

Demographic History

Until recently the Gullah/Geechee people of the Sea Islands and Low Country of South Carolina and Georgia were for the most part a genetically isolated and insulated population. Due to the continued importation of slaves into the 19th Century, this population was among the last in the United States to receive a genetic contribution directly from Africa. Because of their isolation, the Gullah/Geechee people are more closely related anthropomorphically to their West African ancestors than other African American populations. They also show less evidence of European ancestry.

Through the early years of the colonies, small pox, pneumonia, tuberculosis, swamp fevers and agues plagued white colonists and their enslaved African and American Indian laborers. While small pox struck all races with equal force, tuberculosis and respiratory ailments took a higher toll on the black population. However, when faced with the swamp fevers such as malaria and yellow fever, there was from the beginning a noticeably lower rate of morbidity and mortality among the enslaved population. This immunity among slaves was only partial, but was also inheritable. Planters may not have known the reason for this immunity, but they quickly recognized the economic advantages of the condition (Pollitzer 1958; Waring 1964; Wood 1974).

Through the early 20th Century, the African-derived population was the demographically dominant population. This was due in part to the frequency of the hemoglobin beta gene (HBB) found on chromosome 11p15.4. This gene occurred at a higher rate in Gullah/Geechee people than in other African American populations, but was about equal to the West African rate. Carrier frequency of HBB varies significantly around the world, but high rates are generally associated with regions such as coastal Africa and Mediterranean countries where there is a high incidence of malaria. Carriers of the gene in its heterozygous form (inherited from only one parent) exhibit a significant degree of protection from malaria, a disease that plagued the Low Country through the 18th and 19th centuries. The same gene in its homozygous state (inherited from both parents) causes sickle cell anemia, which has appeared in Gullah/Geechee people at a higher level than in other African American populations. As increasing marriage to non-Gullah/Geechee people continues to dilute the gene pool, the sickle cell trait is occurring with less frequency (Curtin 1968; Wood 1974).

The population of the Low Country continued to grow between 1900 and 1950. During the period, the coastal regions and Sea Islands grew 115% in comparison to an average of 104% for the states of South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. The national growth rate during that period was only 99%. The population increase of whites drove the overall growth rate. African-American population exhibited a fairly stagnant rate of change. The first half of the 20th Century reflects the most dramatic rate of change for racial composition in the Low Country. The ratio of black to white population, which had been 3 to 1 in 1850, declined to 2 to 1 in 1900 and to 1/2 to 1 in 1950. This large deviation of racial population ratios may be attributed to a combination of several factors including white migration into the area, black emigration to the North or to Low Country cities, agricultural trends, health care, and military presence. (See chart to follow)

Tens of thousands of blacks left the South in the early decades of the 20th Century and headed to the North where they could escape the poor southern economy and the segregationist Jim Crow laws. Around the middle of the 20th Century, there was significant immigration into the study area by African-Americans and others from different regions of the United States. At the same time, there were increased incentives for Gullah emigration from the region, thus increasing Gullah/Geechee out-marriage. In

general, genetic isolation of the traditional local African-American population has been reduced, with a concomitant reduction in Gullah/Geechee population distinctiveness to whatever extent it previously existed.

The trend of African-American population decline as a percentage of the total population began to change with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This legislation delineated the framework for equal status under the law for all Americans. During the mid 1970s, as job opportunities dwindled and racial tensions intensified in northern urban areas, fewer blacks left the area. While the African-American population has increased steadily since the 1960 census, the proportion of African-Americans has remained steady at approximately 30% of the total population (Lee 2002). Blacks started returning to the South from other regions between 1975 and 1980. Since that time, the Northeast and Midwest have experienced net losses in African-American population, while the West and the South have experienced gains.

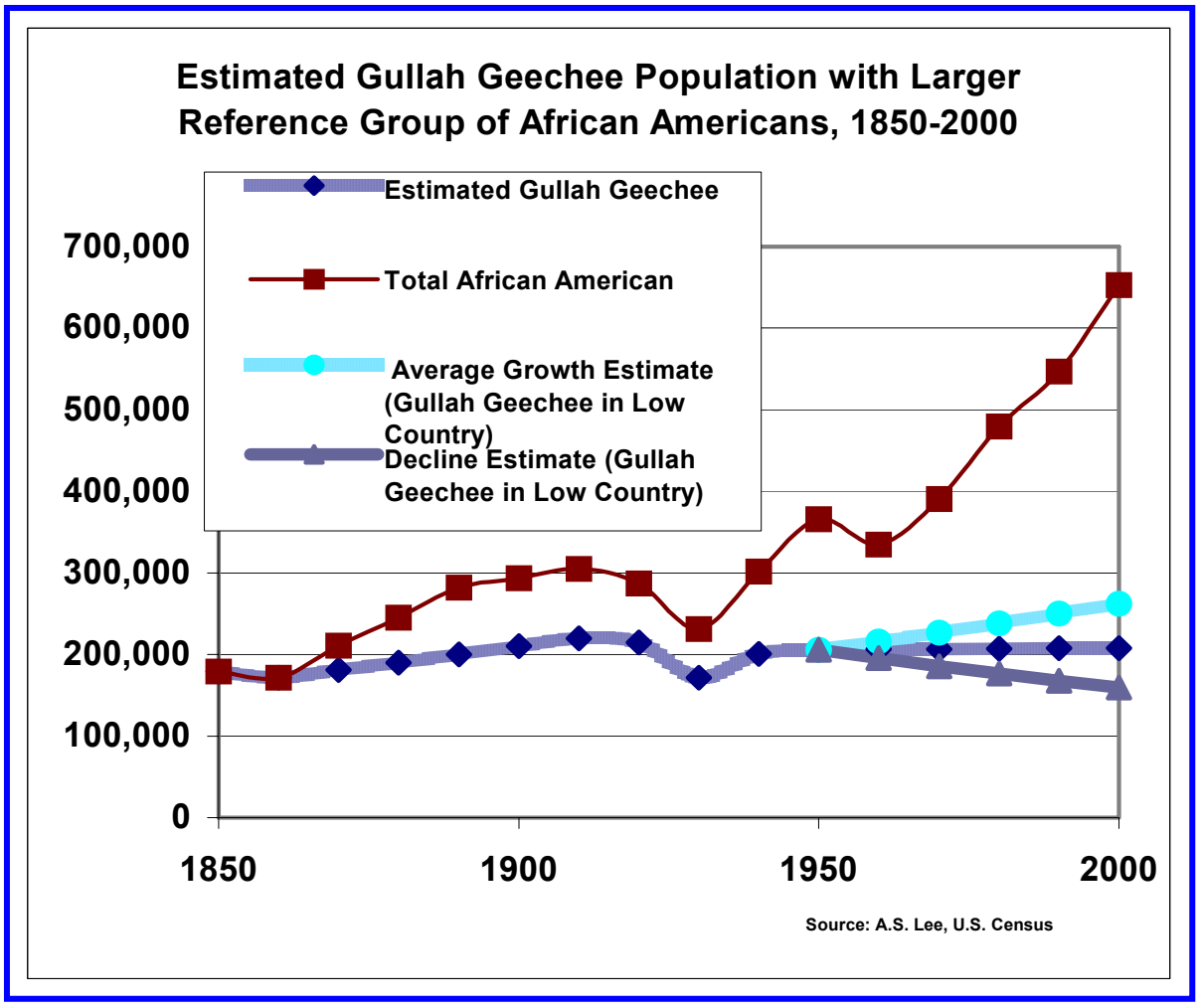
Because of Gullah/Geechee out-migration and the immigration of African-Americans from other regions, it is difficult to determine from available census data just how many Gullah/Geechee people specifically live in the South Carolina/Georgia coastal area at present. Similarly, attempting to estimate the total number of Gullah/Geechee people everywhere in the world today would be virtually impossible. Nonetheless, by projecting local historic African-American demographic growth rates using pre-1950 census data, the project team estimates that there are between 159,222 and 262,623 Gullah/Geechee people within the total African-American population of 652,701 reported in the 2000 census for the coastal counties of South Carolina and Georgia.

Cultural survival does not, however, require genetic isolation. Indeed, some degree of continuing out-marriage has always been adaptively advantageous to small human populations — culturally, socially, politically, and genetically. The same is true of the Gullah/Geechee population under the current conditions of stress and change. Nonetheless, perception of the loss of Gullah/Geechee social integrity resulting from persistent and expanding marriage non-Gullah may in combination with other social changes — may be perceived as a major stressor

Coastal Population Growth 1850-2000

Location	1850-1900	1900-1950	1950-2000
United States	229%	99%	86%
South Carolina, Georgia, Florida	146%	104%	238%
Study Area	75%	115%	151%

Source: US Census Data



Shifts in Total African American Population 1995-2000			
State	*In*	*Out*	*Net Gain*
Florida	168,862	117,576	51,286
Georgia	253,237	122,488	130,749
North Carolina	142,875	89,504	53,371
South Carolina	77,555	61,302	16,253
Total Net Gain	642,529	390,870	251,659

Source: US Census Data